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Neighbors mixed on stadium plans

By Ellen R. Delisio
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EAST HARTFORD — While town and state officials work on plans for a University of Connecticut football stadium at Rentschler Field, neighbor Edward Brault has a few plans of his own.

"If they build it, I'm going to cut a hole in the fence and sell hot dogs," joked Brault, whose house and property at 583 Silver Lane cut into the field.

While Brault said Friday he likes the idea of a stadium in his back yard — truly — other residents of Silver Lane and adjacent streets are divided about the issue. And in one case, a household itself is divided.

Several people said initial plans for the stadium sound good, but they want to hear more about the potential costs to taxpayers, and how the structure will look. Reactions also were mixed to other possible uses for the stadium, such as rock concerts.

"Taxes already are high," said Henry Lee Prude Jr., who lives on Simmons Lane, perpendicular to Silver Lane. "That's heavy right there," he said of the potential for additional taxes. "If taxes go up, leave them in Storrs."

On Wednesday, United Technologies Corp. signed a memorandum of understanding with the state that could lead to UTC donating between 60 and 75 acres of the vacant 650-acre Rentschler Field to the state for a UConn stadium.

If the state takes control of the property, though, there is the potential for the town to lose tax revenue. The Rentschler Field land

is appraised at \$35,000 an acre, according to Town Assessor Richard Buchanan. The town assesses the property at 70 percent of its value — so for 75 acres, the total assessment is about \$1.837 million, generating about \$68,888 in tax revenue a year, Buchanan said.

What remains unclear is whether the stadium would qualify for payment in lieu of taxes aid from the state, which towns receive as reimbursement for taxes on certain properties, such as hospitals. A stadium is not among the items list for PILOT money, and it probably would take legislation to get the town such cash, town officials said.

In addition, Mayor Timothy D. Larson has discussed the possibility of seeking between \$6 million and \$10 million from residents for road improvements and to build a boulevard through the complex.

But so far, none of that worries Brault.

"I'm happy with it," he said of the stadium plan. "I think it will bring jobs, and lower taxes eventually. I think it will benefit the town and the price of houses. I'm hoping it will upgrade the area. Maybe I'll get a good sale on the house."

Brault said his biggest concern if the state takes control of the property is eminent domain — and the possibility that the state could take his home.

"I've lived here for 35 years," he said, adding he would not give up the house without a good offer. "I love this house because everything I need is right on this street. I can see for two or three miles in the back; I like having the country in the back,

and the city in the front."

As for the threat of higher taxes, "The money will come from somewhere," Brault said. "Maybe they will get it out of the stadium."

Another stadium supporter is Naz Mohiuddi, an employee of the Mobil gas station at 483 Silver Lane, which would be right in the path of construction workers and UConn fans.

"I think it's a good idea," Mohiuddi said. "People will come here when they start to build. It will add to business, and I think it will benefit the town."

He agreed that taxes might increase, but said he is not too worried. "Taxes may go up, but the stadium will make money," Mohiuddi said.

Vivien Riley, 510 Silver Lane, said she also is pleased with the plan, although she might think twice about it, depending on the taxes. "I'm delighted," she said. "I'd rather they do something like that than condos or Six Flags," Riley said, referring to the 1997 plan for an amusement park on the site.

"I think people will be coming into restaurants and stuff," Riley added. "And it will only be one day a week. I'm already used to traffic."

Not so sold on the plan is Matt Pearson of nearby Warren Drive, who said he is concerned about the effect on his property values, additional taxes, an increase in traffic, and the possibility of a rise in the crime rate.

"If it increases traffic and decreases property values, I'll be the first to start a petition

against it," Pearson said. "Just because some people want it doesn't mean I want it."

Keith Knowlin, who lives on Simmons Road, had similar concerns. "I don't too much care for it," Knowlin said. "I think it would cause a lot of undue aggravation and traffic. I moved to East Hartford to get away from the hustle and bustle of Hartford. I would probably look for another apartment if they build it."

Thomas Scott, of Silver Lane, said he is sure a stadium will increase property values and bring more business to town. His wife, Janice, however, said she is "not happy about it."

The field, Thomas Scott said, is going to waste now, and a stadium could lead to new businesses opening up in town, such as restaurants.

Grace Riding, 520 Silver Lane, also is hoping for the best. "If my property values go up, I could sell my house and get out of here," she joked. If taxes go up, Riding added, she would "Not be so happy. But what else are they going to build here?"

And while Riding said she would miss looking out her front window and seeing trees in the field across the street, that does not mean that a stadium would be unattractive.

"It all depends how they make the entrance," she said. "If they put it in nicely with a lot of shrubbery... and if it blends with the neighborhood, it wouldn't be bad."

Staff writer Julie Sprengelmeyer contributed to this story.